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COPEING: PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE EXPERIMENTS FOR TAKING CARE OF...

ABSTRACT

Increasingly unstable climate events such as floods and other natural disasters have become part of the grand narratives of the Anthropocene that create distance, fear, anxiety, hysteria and apathy that are part of our everyday lives. In asking how can we-as-humans survive both the real and grand narratives of this epoch, my own survival story of *Desperado* (memories of our family sailing boat) became an anchor for COPE (Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies). These choreographies, as series of guided performances/survival tours, involved tactics and strategies/mechanisms that contributed to an ecology of participatory practice. The instructional video *Lilo Safely* drew together actions of rafting, resting and recovery as a way to take care of other, to deconstruct the instrumental way of being-with the planet, encouraging us to include the non-human, the neuro-diverse, into our own stories of surviving with and beyond, through the practice of Rafting-with.

Keywords: Ecological; Performance; Practices; Art; Choreography; Rituals; Dance; Participation; Boats; Oceania; Environmental

Lilo Safely: Instructional Video was developed as part of my research project into participatory performance practice, Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies, that became COPEing – where I enacted survival drills, boat trips and walking performances in Auckland, Dunedin, Prague, Lisbon, and Rarotonga in the Cook Islands. *Lilo Safely* was also the beginning of the immersive performance, RAFTING, that was held in the Black Box studio at AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand as part of my final PhD examination in November 2017 (Houghton 2017a). The location of the performance was near the source of Te Wai Horotiu, an underground river that runs through the centre of the city of Auckland and thus became significant as a site of imminent danger due to the risk of flooding during heavy rainfall. *Lilo Safely* demonstrates practical actions that can be taken, using an inflatable lilo, in the face of sea level rise and climate catastrophe (Houghton 2017b). This was played in the Green Room before participants moved into the immersive performance experience of the Black Box studio. The aim

of the video was to combine instructions for survival, through taking care of *other*, that were serious with a humorous undertone. Participants also gathered survival items and costumes that they might need in case of emergency.

COPEING – RAFTING-WITH

The aim of this project was to explore participation in performance as a way to critique instrumental ways of being-in-the-world in relation to environmental issues of the Anthropocene. Drawing on Joanna Zylińska's minimal ethics,¹ which encourages a life-affirming ethic that includes the biotic and abiotic, I wanted to understand how or if performance practice might assist to challenge the grand narratives of survival that had emerged

¹ See Zylińska, J. (2014) *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*. Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press.

surrounding this newly-termed era.² The idea was to challenge the instrumental rhetoric that helps to construct these narratives of survival. My tactics attempted to foreground audiences as participants, as co-creators of COPEing Choreographies, that opens to a conceptual and physical *agencement* of an encounter expressing itself as *still-in-formation*. The aim of these choreographies is to move towards a release, a letting-go construed as a poetics of non-mastery.³ The practice is situated within choreographic and participatory performance paradigms that revealed tactics for ways to de-authorise the artist, handing over the work to participants, and the choreography to the affects of place and weather. COPEing Choreographies emerged through the subsequent tactics of rafting, resting, and recovery as a collective practice that aimed to create the experiencing, sensing of survival and disaster, sharing stories of survival (as well as my own) that created new stories/performances for the Anthropocene. *Rafting-with* emerged from the accumulation of what survived from each survival tour as a continually changing process.

By introducing this research through the key conceptual term *still-in-formation*, I introduce its agency up front, within the very fabric of this project. The significance of *still-in-formation* is housed within the term *agencement*, inherited from artist and philosopher Erin Manning – as used by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (yet contentiously translated by Brian

² The term 'Anthropocene', for this research, holds with it an ethical imperative in a similar vein to Zylinska. The term itself unfolds a history that, like all history, is contestable: Zylinska describes how the 'Anthropocene' proposed by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 (from anthropo, man, and cene, new), has become the name for a new geological epoch that supposedly follows the Holocene, that began approximately 12000 years ago. The term is a response to the immensity of human influence upon the geo- and biosphere via processes such as farming, deforestation, mining and urbanisation all contributing to differing opinions on when to date its beginning, yet it is becoming part of the identification and bringing attention to the environmental crisis we now face. See Zylinska (2014, pp.18-19).

³ The work locates poetic forces within Martin Heidegger's *destruktion*, forwarding concepts of *poetic-dwelling*, *truth-as-unconcealing* and *being-with*, and Jacques Derrida's *living-on*, as a poetics of non-mastery in the face of dominant strictures of life within our epoch of technicity. See Heidegger (1962; 1977), Derrida (1979) and Houghton (2018).

Massumi to the English word 'assemblage'). I, as Manning, return to the French use of the term which, according to Manning, "carries within itself a sense of movement and connectibility, of processual agency" (Manning 2016, p.123).⁴ As the quote below infers, my research engages a spatial dynamics through choreographic performance art, suggesting that a participatory mode of art practice may offer something *still-in-formation* as a detour away from instrumental mastery. I describe my practice as an *agencement* of conceptual frameworks that turn or cleave experience by attempting to refrain from closure, mastery or stasis through multiple iterative events. That is, my participatory practice attempts non-closure through working with others (theorists, artists and colleagues alike) – these assemblages make up my practice of participatory ecologies that is *always-already, still-in-formation*:

Agencement produces ways of becoming, to invent new modes of existence moves away from subject based identity towards an ecology of practices where 'agencement speaks to the interstitial arena of experience of the interval, an interval not of category but in the pre-category where that field is still in formation.' (Manning 2016, pp.123-124)

By exploring fundamental concepts pertaining to *ethics, poetics, everyday, survival* and *choreographic object*, I attempt to reveal how these concepts gather or assemble as a belonging so that they perform strategically as enlivened processes, methods, compositions and tactics within my research performance practice. The practice itself brings together somatics and participatory art practice as an interdisciplinary choreographic practice that focuses on performing with others and moving through place. Survival technologies (safety codes and equipment) that are instructional (gestural, spoken, written) and material (survival equipment as protection) offer both costuming and actions that evoke the experience and aesthetics of 'states of emergency'. COPEing was revealed through acts of taking care

⁴ The term is translated by Brian Massumi as 'assemblage' in Massumi, B. (1987) 'Translators Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy,' in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. Manning leans on Felix Guattari's invention of the term, signifying the engagement of cleaving with experience.

of *other* in response to my own personal narrative of *survival*.

The ethical question arising in this research is, how do we (humans) come to live with all forms of life proximate to our everyday lives, construed as poetic release? How might we live among the existing remains of human mastery contained within the narratives of survivalist mastery, yet without control? The practice harbours multiple choreographic tactics through scoring fragments of these survivalist mastery narratives. I located these fragments of dominant (rhetorical) strictures of survival among such genres as tour and guide, drill, instructions, authorship, and commander. These roles and their manifest play tactically assemble, curate and choreograph exchanges through a range of new media and technological recording devices. For example, the instructional survival mode has, through iterative processes, staged innumerable technos-exchanges including the production of said *Lilo Safely: Instructional Video*, archiving somatic performances for surviving. What is key here is that the work appropriates a master survival discourse produced through generic instructional safety protocols such as those we receive on aeroplanes prior to any flight's departure, and yet produces innumerable exchanges for being-with (its) immediate everyday surround(s) as choreographed survival aftermath.

WHAKAPAPA (GENEALOGIES) OF PRACTICE⁵

Ka Mua, Ka Muri.⁶

I embark on this research following the Māori proverb that describes an image of a person walking backwards into the future as a way of being in the world. I forge into the future with my back

facing forward, looking back over the past as a way to recognise the present. I thus provide pointers to these in recognition of the origins, genealogies of my whakapapa starting with who I am, where I come from, my connections to land (whenua)⁷ and family (whānau). My background as an ecologist (with a Masters in Zoology),⁸ a choreographer (Masters in Creative and Performing Arts),⁹ and a costume designer, gives me a unique perspective to this research incorporating somatic dance practice, craft and technique, both objective and subjective perspectives to systems in nature as an interdisciplinary practice. Each of these practices use guiding instructions and witnessing (as opposed to observing), and focus on being process-orientated, attuning/listening to external environments, rather than being concerned with the final product (or spectacle). These practices advocate sensing of the body from the inside out, and are useful as choreographic tools for creating performative images of the strange.¹⁰ In the context of the ethics of this project, somatic practices that prioritise the slowing of the sensing body as it engages with the immediate environment (both technical and biological) provide a reprieve from the fast-paced nature of our contemporary world. Somatic practices can therefore be seen as an act of recovery in response to instrumental ways of being in the world.

SAILING VESSELS AND RAFTING SURVIVAL

In researching a range of local and international locations and associated stories for performance in relation to environmental issues of water, I embarked on a personal journey regarding my own tūrangawaewae (in Māori terminology, a place to stand, a homeland) and my sense of belonging (or not belonging).¹¹ As a Pākehā descendent of English and Scottish immigrants to New Zealand (1860-1930s), aspects of this

5 Whakapapa in te Reo Māori (the Māori language) means 'from where I come from': (noun) genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent – reciting *whakapapa* was, and is, an important skill and reflected the importance of genealogies in Māori society in terms of leadership, land and fishing rights, kinship and status. (Moorfield 2005). *English Māori Dictionary and Index*, s.v. 'Te Aka: Māori English,' <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>.

6 Mua: 'In front of or before'. Muri: 'the rear or behind'. Muri also means 'to grieve or mourn', as well as 'the north of departed spirits', that refers to Cape Reinga, the northern tip of Aotearoa New Zealand (Moorfield 2005).

7 Whenua also means 'placenta'.

8 See Houghton (2001).

9 See Houghton (2013).

10 See Houghton (2011).

11 My interest in water as a performative site began during my Masters research in 2011, which resulted in a performance about the kinesthetic sensing of sites around Auckland. It also happened to align with the illness and loss of my father earlier that same year. This project reveals the ongoing survival of grief and loss as a lived process 'living on' through somatic through stories of water and place.

discovery revealed my relationship to the geographic location of the island nation New Zealand Aotearoa. In this journey of discovering my origins, I found that my early associations with water took me back to childhood memories of sailing on board the boat that my father built, *Desperado*.¹² I began to think about my memories of boating, the feelings they evoked and how they had affected me. I wondered how the threat of a changing climate would affect the way the sea might be experienced by our children.

Desperado, my waka, was built from an individual kahikatea (New Zealand native tree) selected by my father from the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand. It was felled from a sustainable forest, laid to dry and then milled into planks that he painstakingly curved and nailed in place by hand over the upturned frame of the boat hull. I now peel back the layers of *Desperado*'s construction to its origin and sail this journey in the skeletal frame of *her hull* within which I situate the remains of my father's memory.

It is therefore not surprising that haunting this research project and its Choreography of Participatory Ecologies has been the figure of the sea holding my envelopes of familiar and familial milieus, specifically the leitmotif of our sailing craft *Desperado*. As a performance narrative, *Desperado* works within the realms of 'boat mastery' that draw on the protocols of survival that are intrinsic to this boat's operation and navigation. *Desperado*'s narrative lives on through multiple performances through storytelling, actions, and the wearing of survival gear borrowed from what we used to wear while sailing (yellow PVC jackets, and hats and sunglasses). The performance archives (such as props, sound and video clips) aimed to encourage reciprocal survival stories from participants, and became a strategy for exploring a sensory experience of survival. Underlying narratives of my experience

¹² *Desperado* was a 36-foot (11m) yacht built by my father in the late 1970s in our backyard, in Nelson, a small town at the top of the South Island of New Zealand. The event was a family affair with my mum, two brothers and I helping with sanding and painting. It took three years to build, in the evenings and weekends when Dad wasn't at work. It was eventually launched in 1981 and it marked the beginning of many sailing adventures around Golden Bay and the Marlborough Sounds.

of *Desperado* were revealed as a commemoration and memorial through the transformation of sailing gear into that which represented 'states of emergency.' As I land at the end of this research, I ask myself how *Desperado* has become an island. Upon its return to the safety of the harbour, it docks alongside this philosophical jetty, yet holds itself as an artwork with its own autonomy.

These watery memories were located in my body, affecting the sense of where I had come from and where I was going, evoking a bodily experience of being a child at play, in submission to the powers of the ocean in an open way that has no fear: a release from control of our land-based existence. The upturned hull then transformed into an arc within which the narrative of our survival, to live on, might be contained.

RAFTING INTO DARKNESS – ASSEMBLING DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Digital technologies became a mode of producing multiple modes of performance and instruction, as well as mapping multiple scales of survival and disaster footage as archive. These digital archives included the accumulation of stories/experiences of survival (from my performance research) and documentation from previous survival tours. The ability for performance to live beyond the *live* encounter through video images enabled small intimate experiences of each performance to be shared again in subsequent performances as a haunting, but also as an act of recovery – in the context of the ephemerality of live performance (always acting in the face of its own disappearance; see Phelan (1993) in Schneider, (2011)) and survival with the human race facing the real possibility of its own extinction. Recovering experiences of survival (through instructions and documentation) might enable the possibility to realise that survival (although often a solitary experience) also can remain in a collective memory. I gathered together footage and documentation of my research within the critical framework of investigating how we see disaster and survival through mediated realities. These contributed towards the final archive as the practice rafted-towards the final installation of RAFTING in the Black Box at AUT University.

THE GREEN ROOM

The *Lilo Safely: Instructional Video* works on us somatically in a series of exchanges between its two central ‘props’ (a human being and a yellow lilo), moving from a more formal predetermination for how exchanges are expected to occur across the two choreographic objects, toward exchanges of release that go beyond expectations. The work is set among a black backdrop, hinting at outdoors at night (via sound and impaired vision) – and yet, the scenographic mise-en-scène is also strangely uncanny (*unheimlich*) due to its formal codes of instruction, eliciting an intensive enclosure or interiority. These exchanges across the mastery of instruction (genre) and release of darkness adds a mysterious quality.

The ‘lilo body’ reminds us that we have a body that requires breath to survive, bringing attention to our own body and senses. There is a likeness to the safety video on an aeroplane, and everyone follows my directions. As I assist with the initial blowing up of lilos, I am bordering, in my performance, between the slick survival drill video and the awkwardness of being there in the present dressed in the same way. I see people looking at me for performative gestures or clues to how they should be interacting. This intimate setting is hot and uncomfortable. Here we are together on the threshold between the actual, the performative and the experiential. The video effects each in a way that evokes the somatic affects and choreography of the safety drills we are familiar with, yet with an undertone of ridiculousness. Initially I resist showing people how to blow up the lilos, and leave the room. Later, upon looking at the GoPro footage, I see everyone following the video to a point where they struggle with the blowing tubes and I return to find everyone as I left them. For some iterations, I assist when needed. Other times, there are individuals familiar with the lilos, so they forge ahead, blowing them up and putting on hats and glasses. The experience of this differs for each individual; some find it frustrating and claustrophobic. With uncertainty rising, there is potential for rebellion and anarchy. On the day the kids are there, they all want their own lilo; on other days, some wish to share blowing efforts with others. Some are more successful

than others, which I find interesting in relation to ideas of survival of the fittest.

Often, the affective survival in this room ranges between that of the individual and the group, revealing the differences in the way instructions can be interpreted. Participants have the choice to take whatever they feel they might need for the Black Box, such as an extra survival blanket or a head torch. They are asked to leave their belongings behind in an effort to really experience what it might be like to be in a survival scenario.¹³ In the final site of the Black Box performance, there exists an attempt for an eerie resonance across the overly formal instruction tenor. Tinged with humour, contrastive colors (or emergency yellow and fatalistic black), body and lilo combine in an envelope of atmospheric temporal, spatial and historical abstraction (or lingering) performing its doubling: enveloping and enveloped within the site of this surviving Black Box.

The *Lilo Safely: Instructional Video* transforms the instruction for safety into a performance archive from what remains (as ruins) long after the action/performance is over. Lepecki’s insight into choreographic re-enactments in the context of the *Lilo Safely* drill reveals as choreography happens in the live encounter as re-enactment without rehearsal. As a result, the choreography becomes a wilding of everyday pedestrian actions and moving bodies through place, following the nature of weather and wayfaring, through dark spaces. It is in the nature of the instructions as modes for re-enactment that are specifically designed as deauthorising as “a singular mode of politicising, time and economies of authorship via the choreographic activation of (the dancers’) bodies as an endlessly creative, transformational archive” (Lepecki 2016, p.141). The final affects of this work lie beyond *Lilo Safely* as the remains (ruins) of the live performance actions. The archive remains, holding creative virtual potential for further performance disasters yet to happen in a co-composition with those that choose to participate. *Lilo Safely* thus becomes integral to the final performance iteration that gathers together archives as choreographic

¹³ See Houghton (2018) for further descriptions of participants experiences in RAFTING (2017).

Fig. 1: Rafting-with Rain. Performing Ecologies Symposium. Allen Hall Theatre, Dunedin, New Zealand. Photo- Christina Houghton.

object,¹⁴ holding together an archival space of the aftermath in the Black Box space for the examination performance.

BLACK BOX

Explore the space and materials in your own terms, Tread carefully, Take your time, Look closely, Stick together, Trust your senses...

As the host, I became responsible for everybody's welfare in the space. This was evoked in the details of our material experience, which considered the question of what might happen if a huge environmental disaster occurs. The care and responsibility was extended into thinking about this potentiality. I enact my performing body in its role as guide, offering direction and focus points towards survival preparations and initial encounters of the installation. Yet once we enter, the participants are able to engage within the archival construct in a way that allows for a survival with *others*. I (as do the participants) act as activator of the archival materials; however, my role aims to be minor as I tend to the materials

as DJ/VJ of the space, operating an accumulation of states throughout the entire journey in the dark. My improvisations act in response to the instructions for action that have emerged throughout this practice, such as the lilo dance instructions, offering and inviting participants to become operators within the work itself. The space created, although risky, aims to be a safe space for *agencement* to emerge through the relationships between the archival materials and the live bodies in the space. This space allowed for new choreographies to emerge between people and objects, always remaining, *still-in-form* rather than existing in a static space. While at the same time, I recognise that my role as author or choreographer is of minor significance to the experience of *others*.

The Black Box released the control structures of the survival drill through the transformation of my performance persona from guide to invisible attendant or assembly monitor; all aimed to transition the experience from mastery to release. The props and actions aimed to encourage *agencement* of bodies, materials and technologies in a posthuman experience. I gave careful consideration to the cues that were given in 'inviting' participants via the gestures within

¹⁴ William Forsythe's 'choreographic objects' alludes to a temporalising of temporal choreographic works-as-ideas organised and organising themselves as alternative sites for acting (Forsythe 2011, p.92).

the props themselves. Thinking this invitation through provided an investigation into the different ways that interaction with the archives could be encouraged, and returned my thoughts to the instructional component of the work. These connections between the instructions, videos, narratives and costumes became an act of choreographing the potential agency of the participant, leaving the final action open to potentialities of all kinds.

In moving towards this minor role as facilitator or assistant (with some know-how), I handed over the work into the hands of the participants. It was here that I had to give my trust to the others I was *Rafting-with*. The participants would then be in a position to take-care-of each other, and the space and I would (hopefully) become the receiver of gentle acts of kindness. This is offered as an alternative kind of survival to one of rescue and heroism. As the experience in the Black Box progresses through the immersive encounter, it evokes the handing over, or transferral, from a personal to an agency of the individual participants, who find spaces to locate their own poetic. The handing over that took place reveals the necessity for the work to move from authorial to non-mastery. The underlying narrative of *Desperado* reveals my autobiographical story of survival as a work of mourning, one that I hand over as a catalyst for release in recognition of life as a force of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

The participants are able to negotiate how they spend time in the space with minimal pointers that evoke a multiplicity of responses from each of them. There are multiple layers of archive, the documentation of previous performances, the costumes and survival technologies that bring us into the present, and the nostalgic content from the stories and archives directly from *Desperado*. These multiple layers of meanings are reflected in the varied responses from participants. I see this as an indication of life lived socially or collectively, where we recognise our difference in experiences and embrace them as part of the creation of the final RAFTING. It is these multiple voices and responses echoing through the work that contribute to the ethico-poetics

of everyday survival; as we COPE, we create Choreographies of Participatory Ecologies in the relational ecology of each live encounter with-in the archives of this research.

As my research practice coalesces around a body of thought on thought-in-action (*choreographics*) as a field in formation, the *agencement* of Manning and William Forsythe leads toward its choreographic object(s). What is an object within the speculative pragmatism of *this* choreography? This question unfolds in a minor gesture of the 'choreographic object' as an *aftermath* or lingering affect of a work, or an event, that ultimately survives on after (and as) the event in its absence. André Lepecki's concept of *afterlives* witnesses a kind of lingering atmospherics, or molecular hanging-on, resonant with Manning's distributed relations performed through its dark aesthetics-as-poetic release.

Each iteration of RAFTING has its intricate details and revealings. The series began with my family, with children, joining friends on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Later iterations during the week required spontaneous negotiations with conference gatherings and AUT maintenance work. As the week progressed, my performance persona solidified as a confident drill-master, and release into the Black Box became a smooth operation that held the participants on each particular day. My relationship with the work seeped into my every waking moment, as I inhabited the space for the month leading up to the final performance series – the laying out of archives and the memories evoked from this research journey represented the letting go of my father's world and the transformation into this world of RAFTING.

For me, RAFTING solidified to a certain extent the action of *Rafting-with*, which has become synonymous with COPEing as the catalyst for new knowledge through practice-led research. Moving-through minor gestures and hauntings of survival allowed us to see, in being-with others, and taking care of *other*, how we might COPE in times of constantly changing climates. In conclusion, I refer to the concept of the Raft that tethers together performance tactics discovered

in the final performance work (and throughout this research project), drawing together modes of choreographic thinking through creative practice that emerges as the ethico-poetics of this research. This Raft crafted through DIY materials, skills and actions does not prioritise a slick production that has commercial benefits, yet sometimes requires a captain or someone in charge, or at other times could just be floating, drifting with no destination. Yet rafting bodies thinking together in difference, reminds us that participation both active and passive has a part to play in the unfolding of the end of the world as an alternate site for acting.

There is no doubt that the experience of RAFTING made unexpected connections, unknown to me, that can only be known by the individuals who encountered the work. It is these *affects* of the work that accumulate as residues from watery experiences, settling in our muscle memory. Returning as fleeting sensations that flow in and out of our consciousness, visiting us as we go on to survive in our everyday lives – fragmented, poetically dwelling, enigmatic and forensic, aftermathing *lives on: suivre* (backwash, fallout, trail, wake). The performances can never be fully recovered from the documents' and objects' pre-disaster to post-survival phase; survival lives on without return to what was before; always *still-in-formation*.

LILO DANCE (FOR ONE OR TWO)

1. Take your lilo into your arms, hold the lilo like a long-lost lover.
2. Slow dance with your lilo, you may do this with a friend.
3. Feel the PVC on your skin, feel the world slow down all around you.
4. Hold the lilo above your head... you are sinking under the surface.
5. Walk slowly in a large circle.
6. Slide the lilo down along your body and lay it down like an injured friend.
7. Lie face down and relax into the suspension of a breath shared.

8. Roll over and over with the lilo.
9. Finish on your back on the lilo and imagine you are floating out to sea.
10. Practice your gentle paddling technique.
11. You have completed your lilo dance.
12. Reach over your body and undo the valves, feel your lilo in a long exhale.
13. When your lilo is completely deflated you may fold it up again and place it back into its package, ready for the next survival drill.

(‘Lilo Dance’, in RAFTING projection video (2017) 10 mins).¹⁵

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